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The Older Second Language Learner: A Bibliographic Essay

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It is difficult to find research concentrating on second language acquisition by older adults, since most studies differentiate only between children and adults, accepting puberty as the division between the two language-learning stages. In an effort to locate studies on the older adult second language learner, one online and three compact disk databases were searched, using search strategies and subject headings appropriate to each particular file.

INTRODUCTION

Although a large body of literature exists on age-related differences in second language acquisition, few studies are available on older second language learners. This paper documents an effort to locate journal articles which concentrate specifically on second language learning by older adults and the problems involved in narrowing the search to this area of interest.

There seems to be general agreement that there are age-related differences in second language acquisition but few answers to many of the questions which can be raised. For example, is the adult second language learner at a psycholinguistic disadvantage? Is foreign language learning easier for the 6 year-old than for a student at age 16, and are the disadvantages greater for a 60 year-old adult? Is there a critical period for second language acquisition? Those who hold that there is such a critical period base their hypotheses on the work of Lenneberg (1967), who concluded that after puberty language learners must make "a conscious and labored effort" to acquire a language because of the specialization of functions in the hemispheres of the brain (p. 176).

Since most studies thus differentiate only between children and adults, and accept puberty as the division between the two language-learning stages, it is difficult to find research which

concentrates on second language acquisition by older adults. Some studies can be located through a non-systematic but intuitive and serendipitous approach, especially when scholars know both the experts in the field and the relevant journal titles. One of the most comprehensive studies which can be located in this way is an ERIC document by Joiner (1981), which addresses the characteristics and needs of older adults learning foreign languages at colleges and universities. Another article is by Burling (1981), who wrote of his personal experiences when, in his mid-50s, he spent a year in Sweden and tried to learn to speak Swedish. He attributes his unsatisfactory progress to factors other than neurological maturation. A third easily found article which addresses second language learning and the older adult is by Zdenek (1986), who reports that in an adult evening course in conversational Spanish which he taught, one of the best students was over 90 years old.

Two Ph.D. dissertations also concentrate on adult second language learners. The first, by Brandt (1983), is a study of the acquisition of German as a second language by two adult immigrants to the Federal Republic of Germany. Basing her discussion on data which were collected in the form of weekly tape-recorded interviews over a period of seven to eight months, Brandt concludes that psychological factors were of central importance to the language acquisition of these learners. The second dissertation, by Brown (1983), focuses on the acquisition of a second language by adults over age 55. In Brown's study, journals were kept by matched groups of older and younger adult learners of Spanish, interviews were conducted, and oral proficiency tests were administered. Referring to her study as hypothesis-generating, Brown concludes that several qualitative factors played a role in the differences observed between the younger and older adult learners of Spanish as a second language.

SEARCHES

In an effort to locate more systematically recent additional studies on the older adult second language learner, one online and three compact disk databases were searched using search strategies appropriate to the particular file. Database thesauri, if available, were consulted to select key terms or subject headings, and retrieval was limited only to those journal articles published since

1983. Each search retrieved articles on age and second language learning, but narrowing the search so as to focus on older learners by combining three or more sets does exclude some relevant material. That relatively few studies on older adults were retrieved in this manner can probably be attributed to the following factors: (1) many authors concentrate on Lenneberg's critical period theory; (2) subject headings such as "Adulthood" and "Age Differences" may include studies of older adults but are not limited to that age group; (3) there are fewer older adults than other age groups studying foreign languages or being studied by researchers.

In general, the use of subject headings (i.e., terms used by the indexer to describe the subject content of the document) retrieves citations which are more relevant than those located only by searching the basic index. Subject headings are identified by "/DE" in *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts* (LLBA), by (SH) in the *MLA Bibliography*, and as hyphenated terms in the ERIC and PsycLIT compact disks. The following describes the databases and search strategies that were used for the bibliographic search:

1. ERIC on SilverPlatter Compact Disc

(Second-Language-Learning OR Bilingual-Education OR Second-Language-Instruction OR Second-Languages OR English-Second-Language) AND (Middle-Aged OR Older-Adults OR Retirement-) AND (EJ in FI)

Although the term "Language-Proficiency" combined with various "Adult" terms retrieved some additional documents relevant to the topic, the second language focus was not necessarily the central one. The terms "Adults," "Age-Differences," "Adult-Education," "Adult-Learning," and "Adult-Students" were also tried, but most did not retrieve any older adult studies. The term "EJ in FI" restricted the search to the journal literature, but there are many other types of relevant ERIC documents in the database as well. It should be pointed out that the citations retrieved from any search of an electronic database will, of course, always contain the requested terms, but they may not necessarily be in the desired context. For instance, three of the citations retrieved from ERIC were about older adults who were teaching English as a second language.

2. LINGUISTICS AND LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR ABSTRACTS (DIALOG file 36)

Second Language Learning/DE AND (Age Differences in Language/DE OR Adult Language/DE) AND (Elderly/ID OR Older/ID OR Retire?/ID OR Aged/ID)

In this database, identifiers such as "Second Language Acquisition," "Age Factors," "Age Role," and the subject headings "Bilingualism" and "Plurilingualism" were also tried, but they yielded few additional citations of interest. It was found that the addition of the identifiers for older adults (see above) was necessary to narrow the search to the age group of interest. The question mark in "Retire?/ID" is DIALOG's truncation symbol, which retrieves any word beginning with the word stem searched.

3. MLA Bibliography on WilsonDISC Compact Disc

Language (BI) AND (Second (BI) OR Learning (BI) OR Teaching (BI)) AND (Age (SH) OR Adults (SH) OR Adulthood (SH))

The *MLA Bibliography* Subject Index lists many potentially relevant subject headings: "Second Language," "Second Language Learners," "Second Language Learning," "Second Language Reading," "Second Language Teaching," "Second Language Writing," "Second Language Comprehension," "English Language Learning," and "[other languages, e.g., French, Spanish, etc.] Language Learning." In addition to "Age," "Adults," and "Adulthood," "Elderly" was also tried. Although a search using subject headings is preferable to using only the basic index, the presence of a large number of possibly relevant language subject headings in this database makes a subject heading search rather unwieldy; however, each does contain the term "Language" and either "Second," "Learning," or "Teaching." The qualifier "(BI)," Basic Index, retrieves words from the subject, title, and notes pertaining to an article's contents.

4. PsycLIT on SilverPlatter Compact Disc

(Foreign-Language-Learning OR Foreign-Language-Education) AND (Adult-Education OR Adulthood-)

The addition of "(Aged- OR Aging- OR Old-Age OR Middle-Aged OR Retirement-)" retrieved only one additional document.

RESULTS

The search strategies followed above represent an effort to be comprehensive. In most cases, combining "Second Language Learning OR Foreign Language Learning" with the appropriate "Adult" terms retrieved most of the relevant citations. Although some relevant studies were retrieved from each of the databases searched, most are from ERIC and LLBA. Several "Adult" subject headings in ERIC gave more access points and increased the output. Studies of college students were excluded unless older learners were specifically mentioned.

The search located the following articles from the recent journal literature, all of which elaborate on age as a factor in second language acquisition, especially in the case of older adult learners:

Abuhamdia, Z. A. (1985). Does age make a significant difference in language learning? Implications for foreign language teaching policy. *Multilingua: Journal of Interlanguage Communication*, 4, 35-42.

Arabski, J. (1984). The role of age in second/foreign language acquisition. *Glottodidactica*, 17, 65-71.

Brandle, M. (1986). Language teaching for the "young-old." *Babel: Journal of the Australian Federation of Modern Language Teachers Associations*, 21, 17-21.

Cohen, Y. & Norst, M. J. (1985). Emerging patterns in the needs of adult language learners in Sydney: Results of a survey. *Babel: International Journal of Translation*, 20, 3-7.

Dannerbeck, F. J. (1987). Adult second-language learning: Toward an American adaptation with a European perspective. *Foreign Language Annals*, 20, 413-419.

Dolly, M. R. (1990). Adult ESL students' management of dialogue journal conversation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 24, 317-321.

- Ehrman, M. & Oxford, R. (1990). Adult language learning styles and strategies in an intensive training setting. *Modern Language Journal*, 74, 311-327.
- Ehrman, M. (1989). Effects of sex differences, career choice, and psychological type on adult language learning strategies. *Modern Language Journal*, 73, 1-13.
- Eisenstein, M. & Verdi, G. (1985). The intelligibility of social dialects for working-class adult learners of English. *Language Learning*, 35, 287-298.
- Elson, N. (1983). The adult learner of ESL. *TESL Talk*, 14, 7-14.
- Flege, J. E. (1991). Age of learning affects the authenticity of voice-onset time (VOT) in stop consonants produced in a second language. *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America*, 89, 395-411.
- Homstad, A. (1987). Neurolinguistic and psycholinguistic research on learning modes of older language learners: Classroom implications. *Hispania*, 70, 374-380.
- Johnson, J. S. & Newport, E. L. (1989). Critical period effects in second language learning: The influence of maturational state on the acquisition of English as a second language. *Cognitive Psychology*, 21, 60-99.
- Kennedy, B. L. (1988). Adult versus child L2 acquisition: An information-processing approach. *Language Learning*, 38, 477-496.
- Koskas, E. (1985). Strategies de traduction liées à l'âge, au contexte et à la modalité d'acquisition de L2 [Translation strategies linked to age, content, and modality of second language acquisition]. *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata*, 17, 135-141.
- Ode, C. (1986). Autonomous language learning by adults: The Amsterdam experience. *System*, 14, 35-45.

- Seright, L. (1985). Age and aural comprehension achievement in Francophone adults learning English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19, 455-473.
- Sorace, A. (1986). The development of linguistic intuition in adult second language acquisition: A research project. *Rassegna Italiana di Linguistica Applicata*, 18, 63-76.
- Swaffar, J. K. (1989). Competing paradigms in adult language acquisition. *Modern Language Journal*, 73, 301-314.
- Swain, M. & Lapkin, S. (1989). Canadian immersion and adult second language teaching: What's the connection? *Modern Language Journal*, 73, 150-159.
- Taietz, P. (1987). Sociocultural integration of older American residents of Paris. *Gerontologist*, 27, 464-470.
- Thomas, M. (1989). The acquisition of English articles by first- and second-language learners. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 10, 335-355.
- Tran, T. V. (1988). Sex differences in English language acculturation and learning strategies among Vietnamese adults aged 40 and over in the United States. *Sex Role*, 19, 747-758.
- Zdenek, J. W. (1983). Teaching FLOP. *Foreign Language Annals*, 16, 103-106.
- Zdenek, J. W. (1986). A survival course for the older learner. *Hispania*, 69, 723-727.

Various reasons are given by the authors of the above list of articles for age-related differences in second language acquisition. The critical (or sensitive) period hypothesis is still mentioned, but teaching methods, motivation, setting, and social and psychological factors (e.g., the learner's concept of self, experience, and application of skills) are also considered to be important.

CONCLUSION

A comprehensive review of literature on the subject of the older second language learner should ideally include, in addition to journal literature, books which can be located by the Library of Congress subject headings (Language and Language--Study and Teaching OR Language Acquisition OR Second Language Acquisition) AND (Adult Education OR Aged). Many academic libraries now have online catalogues in which it is possible to combine subject headings. Dissertations can be located through *Dissertation Abstracts International*, but many are also indexed in online or compact disk subject indexes, such as the *MLA Bibliography* and PsycLIT.

With the number of older people in our population increasing, there is a growing percentage of non-traditional students in colleges and universities and an increased proportion of older students enrolled in second language courses on and off campus. This demographic development should give language instructors and researchers more opportunities for research on second language acquisition by adults. The bibliographic search techniques outlined in this essay can help one get started.

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